



Director of
Central
Intelligence

~~Secret~~

25X1

MASTER FILE COPY

**DO NOT GIVE OUT
OR MARK ON**

Syria: "Cold Start" Offensive This Year?

Interagency Intelligence Assessment

~~Secret~~

*NIIA 86-10002
May 1986*

Copy 181

Page Denied

SECRET

25X1

NI IIA 86-10002

**SYRIA: "COLD START" OFFENSIVE
THIS YEAR?**

Information available as of 22 May 1986 was
used in the preparation of this Assessment.

SECRET

SECRET

25X1

SCOPE NOTE

This Interagency Intelligence Assessment was requested by the Department of State [REDACTED]

25X1

25X1

[REDACTED] is a deliberate Syrian "cold start" offensive on the Golan Heights feasible or likely in 1986, and is Israeli Defense Minister Rabin correct in his appraisal that Syria's deteriorating economy may impel Syria to launch a war in the next six months? This Assessment does not address the larger and much more complex issue of the overall prospects for conflict between Israel and Syria in 1986 or beyond. Nor does it address the possibility of a conflict occurring because of an escalation of tensions in Lebanon or resulting from some international terrorist incident. The Assessment has been coordinated at the working level among the Central Intelligence Agency, the Defense Intelligence Agency, the Department of State, the National Security Agency, and the intelligence agencies of the services [REDACTED]

25X1

Page Denied

SECRET

25X1

DISCUSSION

1. Is a Syrian "cold start" attack—a sudden offensive from existing garrisons and deployments—on the Golan Heights feasible and/or likely in 1986? ☐

The first basic judgment of this Assessment is that a limited Syrian "cold start" attack, while technically feasible, is very unlikely. Any attack of this type would be so militarily ineffective that it would be quickly defeated by Israel and leave Syria open to massive retaliation. ☐

Moreover, as long as the Arab-Israeli peace process is inactive, there is little or no political pressure on Syria to force a showdown with Israel. For now, Syria appears satisfied to probe Israel's "red lines" in Lebanon, while it builds up its military forces for a possible major confrontation sometime later this decade. Syria ideally would like to increase the manning level of its frontline forces, acquire new weapons, complete a major reorganization of its forces, and conduct extensive training before attempting a surprise attack. ☐

Syria currently would encounter great difficulty in launching a "cold start" attack to achieve limited and temporary objectives. At best, and if not preempted, the Syrian Army could begin a limited attack with major elements of its two frontline divisions against Israeli positions on the Golan within 16 to 24 hours, with minimal redeployments from peacetime garrisons. A number of constraints exist, however:

- Since the Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon last spring, Syria has allowed the manning levels of its ground forces facing Israel to decline—primarily by releasing conscripts to bolster its flagging economy. Some units are 30 to 40 percent understrength. Although Syria's forces are strong enough to fight defensively, the reserves would have to be mobilized to conduct offensive operations. Damascus is modernizing its reserve system, which performed poorly during the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, but a general mobilization probably would still proceed haphazardly and be readily detected by the Israelis.
- Even though Israeli warning time could be sharply reduced by a series of well-planned moves executed over time by the Syrians, the very prolonged nature of such preparations—including the buildup of force levels opposite the

Heights through periodic and limited reserve callups—would increase the likelihood that Israel would detect such preparations and act militarily to preempt Syria's "cold start" option.

- The recent US attacks on Libya have reenforced doubts in Syria about its air defense systems, especially the SA-5. President Assad is pressing the Soviets for new weapons to prevent Tel Aviv from rapidly attaining air superiority that would lead to the isolation of the Golan Heights and open Damascus to attack. ☐

- In the area of reorganization and training, the Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon last year enabled Syria to pull out three of its divisions and begin concentrating on restoring combat effectiveness eroded by prolonged duty in that country. For example, the 3rd Armored Division—long considered Syria's best because of its cohesiveness—did not conduct a major exercise between June 1982 and December 1985 when it engaged in the largest maneuvers in recent Syrian history.

- Finally, it is highly doubtful that Assad believes the time is right for a sudden Syrian offensive. In the absence of any major political incentives to force a showdown with Israel, Assad probably does not believe that Syria can regain the Golan, either through negotiation or war, at least through the end of the year. Even if Syrian forces inflicted significant Israeli casualties before an ultimate Syrian defeat, the Israelis would not return the Golan Heights to Syria. ☐

- 2. Do Syria's economic problems increase the incentive for Damascus to attack in 1986? ☐

The second basic judgment of this Assessment is that Syria's deteriorating economy will not be a compelling factor in any decision by Assad to force a

SECRET

25X1

showdown with Israel this year. There has been no indication [] that the Syrian leadership believes its economic troubles are so extreme that it must take precipitous action against Israel. We do not agree with Rabin's contention that Assad may be forced to make major defense cuts to save his economy. []

Although the Syrian economy will probably deteriorate further in the next year, increased oil production may boost Syria's dismal foreign exchange position by cutting oil imports. Syria's real growth has been negative for the past three years, and it has suffered from persistent current account deficits and foreign exchange shortages. []

estimates 70-percent inflation over the past eight months for basic foods, severely reducing the purchasing power of the poor- and middle-class fixed-income workers. The economic decline may be slowed, however, as Syria gradually begins crude oil production from its field at Thayyem, which may produce up to 60,000 barrels per day by October. []

A war actually would only further disrupt the hard-pressed Syrian economy. The only credible arguments for war as a remedy to economic problems would be:

— To elicit additional Arab aid.

— To distract public attention from the severity of their economic woes. []

25X1

25X1

25X1

25X1

25X1

In any event, aside from the uncertainty of how much more Arab aid a war could elicit in these hard times for OPEC, the Syrians are probably aware that any plausible aid increments would be consumed chiefly by replacement of lost military hardware and would not make up for the direct economic losses caused by the fighting. []

25X1

25X1

The putative distraction of public attention from economic problems would not last much longer than the fighting, after which the Syrian public—even if briefly exhilarated in the unlikely event of some success—would soon again be confronted by the realities of an economic mess even worse than before. []

25X1

25X1

SECRET

Page Denied